

INDIA

Developing Listening Comprehension Using Easily Available Resources

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In a country like India where English is learnt as a second language, opportunities for oral practice are fewer than for listening, and throughout the learning period more emphasis is laid on the development of reading and writing. A survey that I conducted showed that a majority of the secondary-school teachers of English in Gujarat, having studied English for more than eight years, find, much to their dismay, that they are unable to understand English if it is spoken at natural, normal speed. Nor are they able to speak English naturally, at normal speed. They feel less confident about their language competence because they received inadequate practice in these two skills. Moreover, all the English they use is with beginners/learners only. This is also true of teachers in other states in India as well.

I undertook an experiment with the assumption that adequate input of language in terms of perceptive listening not only improves listening comprehension, but also acts as a springboard in terms of speaking. In order to understand everyday conversations and comprehend talk on subjects of general interest, one has to experience them repeatedly. But surprisingly, though English is available to us through radio and TV, not many people keep their ears open.

During the course of my work in the INSET programme¹ I used these easily available resources in my study to give the teacher participants adequate exposure as well as to create an awareness of the usefulness of recorded broadcast. I used taped excerpts of five English news bulletins, two weather reports, and eight commercial advertisements. In addition I used recordings of a couple of stories. Below I present samples of each type of material along with the tasks involved. The audiotapes were played not in a lan-

guage laboratory where outside noise is shut off, but in a normal classroom to give a real-life experience.

News bulletins

Listening to news bulletins not only gives the teachers practice in listening comprehension but also gives them insight into how to read a "text" aloud with proper stress and intonation. The use of news bulletins is of special importance, given the context where school teachers read the lesson aloud (model reading) for students.

Excerpts of All India Radio news bulletins of approximately 30 seconds duration were taped and played back. Task sheets were distributed before each session. The questions on these task sheets are simple as the aim is not memory retention but comprehension.

TAPESCRIPT 1

In Sri Lanka, the Indian High Commissioner, Mr. L. N. Jha, today met the President, Mr. Premadasa, and discussed the setting up of more refugee camps with Indian aid to stop the exigence of refugees to India. Supply of essential items and to minimise civilian casualty also figured in today's discussion. Mr. Jha is leaving for India for consultation. Meanwhile the Sri Lankan army is reported to have taken over the Mullaitivu town after six days of battle against the LTTE. Fifty-three LTTE men and six soldiers were reported killed in this operation.

TASK SHEET

Indicate TRUE or FALSE in the brackets provided.

- The Sri Lankan president wants to set up refugee camps in India. ()
- India and Sri Lanka do not want refugees to go to India. ()
- India and Sri Lanka do not want innocent people killed. ()
- The Indian army has taken over the Mullaitivu town. ()
- Six soldiers were operated upon. ()

At the beginning of each task appropriate instructions were given. These were further supplemented by oral instructions to avoid any confusion. At first the teacher participants found it difficult to comprehend the news, and the tape had to be played twice. But when they reached the fifth excerpt, one listening was enough to undertake the task.

Weather report

We listen to the weather report for various reasons and weather reports form an integral and essential part of our day-to-day life. Two short excerpts were used in the study. Here again, task sheets in the form of a grid were given before the audiotapes were played. After filling in the grid, the teacher participants engaged in a short discussion on the weather report.

TAPESCRIPT 2

The southwest monsoon has further withdrawn from East Rajasthan and the plains of west Uttar Pradesh. A low-pressure area has formed over west central Bay of Bengal off north Andhra Pradesh, South Orissa coast. Today's INSAT picture shows dense cloud mass over west central Bay of Bengal and adjoining areas of West Bay, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, and Orissa.

Here is a warning. Heavy to very heavy rain is likely at a few places in Andhra Pradesh, and Andaman and Nicobar islands.

TASK SHEET

Listen to the weather report and complete the grid below by marking (✓) in the relevant boxes.

	East Rajasthan	Plains of U.P.	Andhra Pradesh	Orissa	Tamilnadu	Andaman/Nicobar
S.W. Monsoon Withdrawn						
Low-Pressure Area						
Dense Clouds						
Very Heavy Rain						

It was observed that the weather report was read too fast for the teacher participants to mark the boxes provided, and also, they had trouble because they were not used to listening to weather reports to complete a task. The audiotape had to be played two or three times. However, they could grasp the gist of the weather report and this was used as a stimulus to speak. Questions like "What do you think the weather will be like?" and "Do you believe weather reports?" were asked, which prompted them to discuss the weather for a short 10-minute duration.

Commercial advertisements

English is widely used in India in advertising various products manufactured in the country. Various government

1. INSET stands for In-Service Training for Teachers of English.

schemes and policies are also advertised in English. Eight such advertisements were taped and played back. Care was taken to select advertisements where the absence of visuals did not affect the audio materials.

TAPESCRIPT 3

- a. Strong binding Vemicol is also termite proof. So even if you are using the same wood and the same carpenter you will feel a lot more comfortable with Vemicol adhesive. Vemicol Termite-Proof Adhesive makes furniture last on and on and on. . . .
- b. Presenting the television of the 90's . . . Optonica! Made to international standards. . . . Optonica Black Pearl. . . . Sharp colours, sharp sound with two-way detachable speakers . . . Optonica . . . the difference is sharp.
- c. Working on a tight budget? Looking for the right effect? So together we choose to buy Dulex . . . from ICI Dulex . . . perfect partners.

TASK SHEET

Listen to the advertisements and fill in the details asked for in the grid below.

S No.	Name of the product	Manufacturer	Claims on the Quality	Jingle

The tape was stopped after playing each advertisement and the teacher participants were allowed enough time to fill in the columns in the grid. They enjoyed this task very much and could easily provide definite details like the name of the product, the manufacturer, and the quality claimed, but they could not provide the jingle/slogan in most cases. They confessed that although they were familiar with all the advertisements, they did not pay attention to the details.

This task was followed by a brief discussion on the merits of each product advertised. Thus the advertisement was a stimulus for them to speak in English and to express opinions about the products.


Stories (dramatised)

Two dramatised versions of stories were recorded and played back to the teacher participants. The first story was

The Blind Man of Westbury, where two characters are present. The second story was *The Story of the White Crow*, where Apollo, a Greek god, curses the crow for its wickedness. After the first story was presented they were asked simple comprehension questions like “What was the man selling?” “What does the other man do for a living?” and inferential questions like “What do you think of the two men at the end of the story?”

After the second story was played back they were asked to think of some parallel stories where someone or some animal is cursed. Then each one was asked to narrate the story to the group. They narrated stories from Indian mythology like “Kunti cursed by Yudhishtira,” “Bhrigu and the Trinity,” “Nandi the Bull cursed by Lord Shiva,” and also stories of “Adam and Eve,” and “Satan, Narcissus and Echo.” Thus besides practice in listening comprehension, this task gave them practice in continuous oral narration. While narrating, some errors of grammar and lack of tense coordination were noticed and corrected incidentally. They were encouraged to use fillers like “I think,” “Well,” etc.

I spent about 10 one-hour sessions on this study. Upon its completion information regarding the time of the English news bulletins was given to the teacher participants along with information about other programmes in English. They were asked to listen to the news bulletins in English regularly.

My experience was rewarding and I became aware of the fact that many problems in language learning can be solved by exploiting the easily available resources around us. 

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